


Art in Review; Ambreen Butt

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By **Grace Glueck**

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I Need a Hero Kustera Tilton Gallery 520 West 21st Street, Chelsea
Through July 29

With flair, wit and uncommon craftsmanship, Ambreen Butt, a Muslim born in Pakistan but now living in the United States, revives the exquisitely detailed medium of Persian and Indian miniature painting to explore modern issues like self-identity, clashes of cultural values, battles of the sexes, wars between good and evil and other knotty matters. Using pencil, gouache and other stuffs on various layers of paper and Mylar, she skillfully evokes the stylization and ornate patterning of the earlier works.

But her stalwart protagonists are not the mannered courtesans, potentates, gods, goddesses and warriors of Mughul miniatures. They take the form of a youngish woman and her clones, dressed in casual Western sweat pants and a shirt, who often wield swords against demons, serpents, lions and other allegorical symbols.

In one scene the woman holds up the endless coils of a tail emerging from a fierce, sassy spotted creature who sits on the head of another woman, while a third, emerging from the torso of the first, peers in seeming bafflement at the creature and its prey. At the bottom of this circular painting, a theatrical dragon cavorts. In another composition, the same young woman crouches on all fours, confronting a trio of howling devil dogs. A fanged and bearded sorcerer stands on her back, holding up a long, spotted reptile that appears to be part of his costume but that begins to ingest another version of the woman who tries vainly to hold onto a sword hilt.

Even more mysterious is a drawing, not done in miniature style, of a kind of Asian everywoman beset by fish. She ejects a cocky one from her mouth, cups a couple between her breasts and sports a school of active ones deployed on her sweat pants. At her feet prances a small flying horse. Is the woman, whose torso and head are swathed in rippling blue and white, like water currents, meant to be a fertility goddess? Or does she reflect the societal struggles of Muslim women? Hard to say, but Ms. Butt, in her first solo show in New York, is a pungent addition to the growing presence here of artists who grapple with bicultural identities. GRACE GLUECK